Major antisemitism bills appear stalled in Congress with summer, election fast approaching

The AAA and CAA could be DOA, with proponents citing a lack of action among congressional leaders as well as split support in the Jewish community

By Marc Rod

As Congress approaches its summer recess, and with just a few weeks in session left before the 2024 election, some in the Jewish community are growing concerned that two major antisemitism bills, the Antisemitism Awareness Act and the Countering Antisemitism Act, appear stuck in Congress without a clear path forward.

The bills face obstacles and opposition from a variety of fronts, according to conversations with numerous sources on and off Capitol Hill, including a lack of action by Senate leadership on AAA — which passed the House earlier this year, but stalled in the Senate after an initial bid to fast-track its passage. It has 31 sponsors in the Senate — 16 Republicans, 14 Democrats and one independent, and was reintroduced in April. It’s supported by a large number of Jewish groups, although others oppose it over its inclusion of the IHRA definition.

CAA, introduced in early April, would create a permanent White House post dedicated to combating antisemitism, along with a range of other steps aiming to codify and expand the administration’s national strategy to combat antisemitism. The Senate version has 31 sponsors — 15 Republicans, 15 Democrats and one independent; the House version has 54, including 29 Democrats and 25 Republicans. It’s supported by more than 60 Jewish groups across the ideological spectrum.

Yet, despite strong support inside and outside of Congress, including from most of the mainstream Jewish organizations, each bill faces significant hurdles in Congress that are leaving the passage of either or both bills uncertain, and congressional leaders hesitant to act.

The Anti-Defamation League is backing both bills. “We view both CAA and AAA as complementary efforts needed to come together in this moment of great peril, and we call on Congress to step up, meet this moment, and immediately pass these important legislative initiatives,” said Dan
Granot, the group's director of government relations. "If Congress ends the year without tackling the urgent issue of antisemitism with meaningful, broad and comprehensive legislation, they will have failed the Jewish community when we need them most."

An initial, longshot attempt to pass AAA in the Senate shortly after it passed the House failed amid multiple objections to the bill from both sides of the aisle.

Rep. Mike Lawler (R-NY), the bill's lead sponsor in the House, said that Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer's "refusal to bring it to the floor for fear of dividing the Democrats is shameful, especially at a time when antisemitism is running rampant across our country."

One source told Jewish Insider that Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) recently met with Jewish leaders about the bill, and said he was working to resolve those objections — but given strident opposition to IHRA from some on the left and right, that could be a difficult prospect and potentially impossible.

Schumer did not provide comment for this story.

The source said Jewish leaders pushed Schumer to bring the bill to the floor for votes and put senators on the record, at which point it would likely see strong bipartisan support.

Rep. Mike Lawler (R-NY), the bill's lead sponsor in the House, has mounted an increasingly aggressive public campaign for a vote in the Senate. He said that Schumer's "refusal to bring it to the floor for fear of dividing the Democrats is shameful, especially at a time when antisemitism is running rampant across our country."

In addition to progressives who warn the AAA would restrict criticism of Israel, the bill has also seen strident opposition from conservative Republicans over free speech concerns, as well as objections to language in the IHRA definition's related examples describing accusations that Jews killed Jesus as antisemitic.

A source familiar with the bill said that conservative supporters of AAA were caught off guard by strong backlash to the legislation from the right, and some Republicans are now afraid of alienating that portion of their base, while lawmakers on the left fear the ire of progressives.

The source said that congressional leaders might pursue other avenues once it becomes clear that some of the objections to the bill cannot be cleared.

"We at the Orthodox Union, along with all the other major American Jewish organizations, would like to see the Antisemitism Awareness Act brought to the Senate floor for a vote as soon as possible," Nathan Diament, the executive director of public policy for the Orthodox Union, said. "It passed the House with an overwhelming bipartisan vote and there's really no reason not to move it along in the Senate."

Sources said that the most likely path to passage for the AAA and CAA might be if they're packaged together — but the CAA, too, faces hurdles.

The CAA, which has become a key plank of House Democrats' proposal for combating antisemitism, has continued to collect sponsors in each chamber, in a bipartisan fashion, but has seen no movement either in the Senate or the House.

An individual familiar with the situation told JI the legislation will likely need to move in the Senate first, and that House leadership is less inclined to take action on it — viewing AAA as a significant step to address antisemitism — particularly until the Senate passes AAA.

"I think we can pass two bills on an issue that is frightening not just to the Jewish community, but undermines our democracy. I think it is worth investing the time to pass a second bill that contains provisions that would increase our ability to combat antisemitism," Rep. Kathy Manning (D-NJ) told JI.

The source said chairs and staff on key committees of jurisdiction in the Democratic Senate and the Republican House have also lodged objections to the bill, making it less likely that the leaders of either chamber will bring the bill directly to a full-chamber vote in the near term.

But another source said those objections may not be immutable, noting that House Judiciary Committee Chair Jim Jordan (R-OH) had initially objected to AAA before allowing it to come to a floor vote. Jordan didn't respond to a request for comment.

In the House, conversations about moving the bill forward with both House Speaker Mike Johnson (R-LA) and Education and Workforce Committee Chair Virginia Foxx (R-NC) thus far have not borne fruit. Rep. Kathy Manning (D-NC), its lead House sponsor, told JI.

"I think we can pass two bills on an issue that is frightening not just to the Jewish community, but undermines our democracy," Manning said. "I think it is worth investing the time to pass a second bill that contains provisions that would increase our ability to combat antisemitism."

Johnson did not provide comment for this story.

Manning and two Republican co-sponsors of the bill requested a meeting with Johnson in April to talk about legislation on antisemitism, including moving CAA directly to a floor vote — the same procedure applied for AAA — but the request was not granted.

Manning said she's working to continue to expand the co-sponsor list for the bill in hopes of increasing pressure on House leadership.

"They are not taking a bipartisan approach, and I think that it shows that they're not really serious about combating antisemitism," Manning alleged. "They're serious about making it a political issue, but they're not serious about really addressing the problem."

The bill has been assigned to nearly half a dozen committees in the House, making it difficult to move forward under regular procedures in a timely fashion. In the Senate, it was assigned to the Judiciary Committee alone.

"There's a crisis of antisemitism. With colleges and universities' school years starting just around the corner, we urge Congress to act on something we're all unified on," said Darcy Hirsh, the director of government relations and advocacy at the National Council of Jewish Women, referring to the CAA.

Manning said she would have no
David Magerman, a computer scientist-turned-venture capitalist, was among the first to join the so-called “donor revolt” against elite American universities in the wake of the Oct. 7 terror attacks and the accompanying rise in anti-Israel protests and antisemitic incidents on college campuses in the United States.

Days after the Hamas attacks, Magerman, who decided to cut ties with his alma mater, the University of Pennsylvania, over its decision to host the Palestine Writes Literature Festival, which featured speakers who regularly call for Israel’s destruction and have been accused of antisemitism, published an open letter addressed to the school’s leaders, accusing them of “support[ing] evil” with their silence about the massacres and calling on “self-respecting Jews, and all moral citizens of the world, [to] dissociate themselves from Penn.”

This week, he told eJewishPhilanthropy that he was taking the multimillion-dollar donation that he’d planned to give to Penn and giving it to Israeli colleges and universities instead, starting with a $1 million grant to the Jerusalem College of Technology to fund a preparatory program for English speakers to teach them Hebrew and integrate them into the private religious college’s full curriculum.

In his interview with eJP, Magerman explained his rationale behind the move, particularly his view that U.S. Jews should...
Judah Ari Gross: You were among the first donors post-Oct. 7 who publicly cut ties with Ivy League schools over their responses to the attacks and the protests on campus. Obviously the situation at the University of Pennsylvania preceded Oct. 7. What was the process that led you to move away from supporting Penn and then decide to shift away from American universities entirely and look instead to Israel and specifically, the Jerusalem College of Technology?

David Magerman: [Regarding Penn,] so my two sons went to Penn — one of them graduated, one of them is now transferring — in addition to my being an alum. I'd been reengaging with the university; I disengaged in the 2010s because I joined the board at Yeshiva University and had kind of pulled away from my work with Penn, but I'd reengaged when [my sons] started going there.

I had learned that they had been reducing their acceptance rates of Orthodox students at Penn, and the community they were shrinking. And then, leading into the new school year, when they had this Palestine Writes Festival. Over the summer, they'd announced this festival, which was supposed to be a festival about Palestinian history, poetry and literature and so on, but if you looked at the list of people presenting and the panelists, it was like a who's who of Hamas supporters and antisemites.

I protested the events behind the scenes, and actually had made a decision and announced my decision to stop giving to Penn after the Palestine Writes Festival happened in September — before Oct. 7 — but I did it somewhat quietly. It wasn't a movement at that point, it was just my personal decision not to support the school because [of] their reduction in acceptance of Orthodox Jews and the negative quality of life that my kids had experienced on campus as observant Jews. And then, obviously, going into the [university's] response to Oct. 7, and the protests and the lack of defending the Jewish community was decisive for me and that's when I made a public pronouncement about abandoning Penn and moving away from any pledges I'd made and deciding not to give any more.

I had been shifting my philanthropic focus away from America for a few years. For many years, I ran a foundation in America called the Kohelet Foundation that focused on Jewish education.

I scaled back that work, and maybe two years ago, I kind of rebooted the foundation to focus on Israel, trying to figure out how to help Anglo olim [English-speaking Jewish immigrants to Israel] integrate into Israeli society more, especially in the education world.

We renamed the foundation Tzemach David — you know, Kohelet was taken [Ed. note: This is a wry reference to the controversial Israeli think tank Kohelet Forum] — which is fine actually. It was nice to rebrand and think about, refocusing the foundation. We'd been working for over a year in schools in Israel when Oct. 7 happened.

I was actually in Israel for Oct. 7, at my apartment in [the Jerusalem neighborhood of] Baka, celebrating Shemini Atzeret, when the attack happened. And when I came back to America and saw how bad things were, I booked a trip back to Israel, without a plan but looking to figure out how I could support the Jewish community — how to support Israel, but also support Americans and bring as many of them as I could to just to make a decision to make aliyah.

Both of my sons had gone to gap-year programs in Israel but I decided to come back to America for college. And I saw the different entry points into making aliyah, whether it's coming as a young adult or as a young family, but also as pre-college and college-age students. I was thinking about ways that I can have an impact on Israel with my philanthropy, how I could increase the likelihood that people would choose to make aliyah.

I'm not looking to support Israel as an exit strategy for America. I don't think we should be trying to run away from or escape terrorists or violence [in America]. We should defend our right to be wherever we are. At the same time I think that our place is in Israel. Post-exile [from Israel], this is the first time that we have a viable option to go back to our Israel, and the State of Israel is an obvious solution, an obvious place for us to go where antisemitism is absent.

I spent some time visiting all of the universities that I could find in a couple of trips and discovered that there were a couple of structural problems that were making it harder for American Jews to choose to go to college in Israel. One of them was the language barrier.

What I learned from most of the colleges is that Americans are the only people in the world who can't learn Hebrew. Immigrants from South America or from Europe somehow manage, but the 'Anglos' — they included the Brits in that equation — seem to be the most resistant.

I identified that as a problem to address in the long term by looking at the Hebrew-language instruction in America, but short term, obviously, we have to deal with the situation on the ground. And a lot of the solutions that colleges were coming up with reactively were English-language programs, creating more siloed majors that you could study for three or four years in English.

I am very much in favor of integrating into Israeli society as much as possible. So I was trying to find ways to support Israeli colleges in a way that leads to integrating students with the Hebrew language instruction. And I found JCT and a couple of other colleges that had an interest and a willingness to create programs that would support English speakers.

I'm a religious Jew myself and I'm very much concerned about the unwelcoming and difficult environment that religious Jews face, not only on American secular college campuses where they face lifestyles that are not consistent with the lifestyle they want to lead, but also antisemitism and other kinds of structural problems, but even at secular Israeli colleges, there are similar problems.

When I got to learn more about JCT, I was really just thrilled to see that there was a college campus that was supportive of Orthodox Jewish life, that had a dual curriculum with a beit midrash program, that separated genders, that was welcoming to the spectrum of Orthodox Jews, but also had an excellent education opportunity. The
one impediment was the language.

So I met with the leadership of JCT a couple of times, and we agreed that Tzemach David would support and fund the development of a program that would create a mechina [preparatory] program to integrate English speakers. So it wouldn’t just be one major that you could study in English, but it would be the full spectrum of majors that they offer.

JAG: And there wasn’t interest or an openness to that at Bar-Ilan University, which is a public university but still often caters to a religious population?

DM: So it’s a coed campus. I spoke to the leaders of the gap-year programs in Jerusalem and tried to understand, why is it that you don’t encourage more of your students to make aliyah, to stay in Israel, to join the army, to do national service and to go to college in Israel? You know they’re going to go to the University of Maryland or Binghamton in America, so why don’t you encourage them to go to Tel Aviv or Bar-Ilan?

And they said, ‘Well, we certainly would support them if that was their decision, but these are coed colleges.’ And just from a rabbinic perspective, according to their obligations, according to Torah, they can’t openly advocate for their students to go to a coed college. But then when I got to know more about JCT, I said, ‘Well, what about JCT?’ They said, ‘Oh, 100%! We could totally recommend our students go to JCT. That’s totally kosher, totally within the hashkafa [worldview] of what we would advise our students.’

So I saw that the first tranche of my efforts to encourage gap-year students to stay in Israel would be to get involved with JCT and to find out what are the impediments to bringing in more American students. You know, not all problems can be solved with money; but some can. So I really wanted to find out what programs are being done, where if they had more money, they could accelerate the development of those programs.

JAG: There’s something profound and humorous about the fact that the heads of religious gap-year programs can’t recommend something that they would consider to be preferable because it’s not ideal, which possibly results in a worse outcome from their point of view. Something along the lines of ‘Perfect is the enemy of the good.’

DM: Well, there’s this funny thing called Torah. Yeah, exactly. It does create some barriers. But I’m sure that, anecdotally, they would counsel them [to study at a secular university in Israel], but they can’t say it as a policy.

JAG: And it’s funny that you mention the University of Maryland: I graduated from Maryland, which has an enormous Orthodox population and generally allows a certain Orthodox lifestyle, even if it is seen by the people at Yeshiva University as the place to go for a ‘wild weekend.’

DM: I was a big supporter of campus life at Penn and I’ve also been a big contributor to the [Orthodox Union’s Jewish Learning Initiative on Campus] program in America supporting Jewish life on other college campuses. However, I think that the facade of the vibrant Orthodox Jewish life [on campus] has been burst by Oct. 7.

I think that the kids now know how unloved they are. [The universities] can’t sweep it back under the rug if they tried. I think now we all know how the administrations, how some of the faculty, how their fellow students really feel about Jews, especially outwardly practicing Jews and Zionist Jews.

I think going to college these days is psychologically challenging. It’s very stressful. Add to that a layer of knowing you’re hated, knowing your people are denigrated, knowing that they’re willing to tolerate hate speech against you on these campuses. I think it’s almost unconscionable of parents to subject their children to these hostile environments.

I became a kind of public figure in the anti-Penn movement post-Oct. 7; a lot of parents from my community and from others all around the country have been asking me where’s safe. And while there’s the University of Florida, there are schools in Texas, and other colleges in America that have shown themselves to be strong defenders of Jews on campus and defenders of Israel, it’s just obvious to me that the one place where you’re not going to get antisemitism is college in Israel.

Even if you’re considering going to Yeshiva University, there are no encampments on the campus, but at the same time, you’re living in New York, you’re not immune to the antisemitism that’s present in the liberal New York environment.

It’s just obvious to me that we should be encouraging our kids to go to college in Israel. The quality education is as good as at least the second-tier universities in America; in the case of the elite schools, if Jewish donors would take the resources we pour — irresponsibly now — into American colleges, if we took one-tenth of it and put it into Israeli colleges, I think the Israeli colleges would very quickly rise to a much higher level across the board in terms of the quality of their programs and the resources they offer. And oh, by the way, their kids can be living in the Holy Land and experience all the other things that Israel has to offer.

JAG: To push back on that a little on two fronts: One, we’re already starting to see the enrollment numbers for the coming year in Israel and in America, and from what I’ve seen there does not appear to be a major rise in American Jews opting to study at Israeli universities despite the issue of campus antisemitism being so prominent. As it is, people would rather graduate with $200,000 in student debt than come study here in Israel, even though there are some top-tier programs here. It just doesn’t draw people. So there’s a question of the efficacy of trying to encourage something that people just don’t seem to be that interested in.

And two, given that not a lot of people are necessarily going to come over to Israel, if all of the Jewish donors and all of that influence comes away from Ivy League schools, that leaves those Jewish students who want to study there without somebody behind the scenes who can really fight for them.

DM: So a number of those points are really valid.

But one thing that guides me is that like 80% of the Jews stayed in Egypt [after the exodus], and [Moses] didn’t leave behind an infrastructure system to support the Jews who stayed in Egypt. At some point we have to recognize that the Golden Age of Jews in America is over. And we need to shift our focus to those Jews who want to leave Egypt, cross the sea and come into Israel. We need to support that much more than in the past.

But in terms of the statistics you’re citing, that’s exactly why I’m doing what I’m
doing. When a Jewish child is born, their parents immediately start figuring out 'How are we going to get them into Harvard?' We have this vision of the Ivy Leagues as being the ultimate standard and success for the education process, and I think that's incredibly misguided. I was one of those parents: Two of my kids went to Penn. I've seen the error of my ways.

The gap-year programs are very effective in creating this positive experience that [kids] realize why they should stay in Israel. But for so many of them, their parents refuse to allow them. They say, 'We spent all the money getting your SAT prep and your applications, you got accepted, you're going to Maryland, Penn, Princeton, Harvard, whatever. You're going to that college, full stop.'

**JAG:** As an aside, it warms my heart that you put Maryland, Penn, Princeton and Harvard in the same group.

**DM:** But I think that there's a number of fronts we have to operate on. First of all, we have to present the colleges in Israel to parents. Actually this next week, we're bringing 10 college guidance counselors from Jewish day schools in America to Israel as a pilot program to introduce them to colleges in Israel. We're bringing them to nine different colleges, including JCT. These college guidance counselors know little to nothing about [universities in Israel], so how are the students and their parents going to be recommended to send their kids to Bar-Ilan or the Technion or JCT, if the guidance counselors who are the ones advising them don't know anything about them? So that's one step we're taking.

Ultimately, we need to get middle school parents to start thinking about Israeli college before they invest tens of thousands of dollars in their kids' educations and summer programs just so they can have the resume to get into an Ivy League school. If they knew that they wanted to send their kids to an Israeli college, they could dispense with all that and give them the education that they need without all those shiny bells and whistles to focus their education on what they need to get into Israeli colleges. One thing I've heard from, let's say, like Technion, I talked to them about getting American students into the school and they said, 'The truth is, we'd love to have more Americans. But when they come here, they're not prepared. They don't know enough math and science to qualify to go to Technion, I think largely because the smartest STEM students, the kids who are most capable of math and science in America are forced to take AP History, AP Government, AP English. They take all of these advanced humanities classes, which are fine for their broader education, but they don't leave enough room for them to do a deeper dive into the math and sciences that the Israeli students are able to do when they know they want to focus on those areas.

If the goal was to get their kids into the Technion or JCT or Bar-Ilan, their high school experience would be tailored very differently.

So I think this is a multi-year process. **JAG:** You mentioned that you met with several different universities. Are there any other universities that you're in talks with about building a similar preparatory program going forward?

**DM:** We're doing a million dollar grant over five years to JCT, and we're looking to do similar programs with four other universities. I had originally had a multimillion dollar gift that was supposed to go to Penn, and I've decided to halt that gift. So instead of just saving the money, I decided to reinvest it in Israeli colleges. And so I'm looking to create these kinds of preparatory programs in five colleges in Israel, assuming they want it.

I'm not looking to tell them what to do. I'm just looking for colleges that are interested in this. And so JCT said that this was something that they wanted to do. They were hoping to launch this kind of program and they were looking for funding for it. So if I can find other universities that have a similar mindset, I would support them as well.

For me, personally, as a religious Jew, JCT is like the gold standard for me. I view JCT as the Yeshiva University of the world. Anyone in the world who wants this dual curriculum, gender-separated education that supports Orthodox life, should choose JCT.

Obviously JCT is a technology-focused university. Obviously one thing that I'd love to see them do is broaden their curriculum beyond technology. But certainly in the areas that they offer classes in, and they offer degrees in, I think that the religious world should all consider JCT.
Talia Jane, a new hire at the magazine and avid social media user, called the Oct. 7 Hamas attacks ‘rebellion against state repression’

By Gabby Deutch

There’s very little that unites Squad lawmakers Reps. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) and Jamaal Bowman (D-NY) with conservative House Speaker Mike Johnson (R-LA). But all three, along with a wide swath of political leaders including the White House, found themselves briefly aligned last week when they condemned protesters who celebrated Hamas and Hezbollah outside the Nova music festival exhibit in Manhattan — and described the demonstration as antisemitic.

Days later, The New Republic published an article arguing that it was “disinformation” to say that the protests outside the Nova exhibit and other recent anti-Zionist actions in New York were antisemitic. Referring to a tweet from President Joe Biden that condemned “horrific acts of antisemitism,” the magazine’s newly hired associate writer for breaking news, Talia Jane, who uses they/them pronouns, said Biden was wrong: “None of the instances Biden cited were antisemitic.”

The analysis has drawn criticism, including from some former New Republic staffers, for Jane’s approach to claims of antisemitism and their willingness to dismiss incidents that many Jews deemed antisemitic. But more than that, Jane’s public social media postings about antisemitism, the war in Gaza and Hamas’ Oct. 7 attacks in Israel raise questions about their impartiality in covering those topics.

“I’m always hesitant to label people racist, antisemite, unless there’s just absolutely undeniable evidence. I think [Jane is] just making terrible arguments that come from a place of factional purity in defense of people who are antisemitic,” said Jonathan Chait, a political columnist at New York magazine and a former senior editor at The New Republic.

An avid poster on social media, Jane has defended people accused of antisemitism and justified the targeting of Jews when they show up to anti-Israel protests. Responding to a video of a group of visibly Orthodox Jews called “Zionists” and denied service at a drink cart in Brooklyn, Jane said in June that this would have been “clear as day antisemitism” if it were “said to someone genuinely just walking down the street.” But, they continued, “it was at a pro-Palestine protest these guys showed up to, who per their own videos had been hanging around annoying people who asked them to leave them alone.”

In April, Jane called it “insane” for the White House to criticize a Columbia student who said on social media that Zionists deserve to die, because “Zionism is synonymous with ethnonationalist supremacy and *not* Judaism.” In May, after a man took to Twitter to complain that someone on a dating app saw his Star of David necklace and asked him if he’s a Zionist, Jane defended that litmus test: “Given how intensely Zionist extremists have co-opted Judaism in pursuit of hate, you don’t think it’s understandable for people to be cautious or at the very least curious of someone depicting Judaic symbolism on their profile where they land on the matter?”

Jane has also said antisemitism “applies to Arabs too,” seemingly a reference to the fact that Arabs are a Semitic people — but the term “antisemitism” was coined by a person who hated Jews, specifically in relation to Jews.

On the morning of Oct. 7, when details of Hamas’ attack and its rising civilian death toll were already known, Jane posted a picture of Hamas militants tearing down a fence to enter Israel under the caption, “Good morning.” Jane called it a “rebellion against state repression.” Jane’s posts on Instagram are even more direct in their targeting of Israel: “The Zionist entity is an immoral and illegitimate state,” Jane wrote as a caption to a June post about protesters burning Israeli and American flags outside the Israeli consulate in New York.

Early in the war, they wrote an article for the digital news site Daily Dot asking whether posters of Israeli hostages taped up in public places are “drawing awareness or baiting pro-Palestinians into getting canceled when they tear them down.” Some people are “wondering,” Jane wrote, “if the posters are being strategically placed to entrap those who tear them down, many of whom support the Palestinian people.”

Jane did not respond to a request for comment from Jewish Insider on Wednesday.

Jane started writing for The New Republic in mid-May. Most of their writing, often several articles a day, is focused on former President Donald Trump and Republicans.

“I’ve discussed the post with the writer and the editor, and we are working to address the situation,” Michael Tomasky, the magazine’s editor, told JI. He declined to elaborate.

“It disgusts me for a whole variety of reasons, not just because we were once pro-Zionist and pro-Israel — which, by the way, did not always mean anti-Palestinian,”
said Leon Wieseltier, who served as the magazine’s longtime literary editor beginning in the 1980s. “It also disgusts me because it’s a real betrayal of universal liberal principles which apply, because they are universal, also to the Jews. Protesting that exhibition on Wall Street about the Nova festival, whatever you think about the current conflict, was stupendously indecent.”

Founded in 1914, The New Republic has since operated under a series of editors and owners who have fluctuated between political ideologies, mostly moving between various iterations of left-wing politics, from liberal to progressive to leftist and everything in between. Wieseltier was brought on by Martin Peretz, who purchased the magazine in 1974 and remained its editor-in-chief in 2012 — a period in which the magazine was closely associated with liberal Zionism, a core belief of Peretz and Wieseltier. It also attained a popularity in literary and political circles that it has not achieved in the past decade.

In 2014, a new owner — Facebook co-founder Chris Hughes — brought in a young tech-savvy editor who was widely unpopular with the staff. The magazine’s then-editor Franklin Foer (now at The Atlantic) was fired, and Wieseltier then quit in protest, leading to a mass exodus of staffers, including Puck’s Julia Ioffe, ProPublica’s Alec MacGillis and The New Yorker’s Isaac Chotiner.

“There were so many people on the left who were so gleeful when Chris Hughes mismanaged the place and caused the entire staff to quit. It wasn’t that they were excited about creating some different version in its place. They basically stopped paying attention to what it published after that,” Chait said. “No one has really cared very much about what The New Republic has done since then.”

On a recent Friday afternoon, a few hours before the start of Shabbat, thousands of Jerusalemites made their way through the oppressive summer heat – and standstill traffic – to the city’s Pais Mivtachim Arena for a pivotal semifinal game between Hapoel Jerusalem and the Israeli Basketball Super League’s flagship team, Maccabi Tel Aviv.

A few hours from the arena to the north and south, IDF soldiers continued to battle Islamic terror groups Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon, but inside, Hapoel fans cheered, chanted and sang passionately as their beloved team battled up and down the court.

Even though Hapoel struggled to keep pace with Maccabi, the atmosphere in the fan’s stand was electric, with fans cheering wildly as the Jerusalem team mounted a second-half comeback before coming up short before the final buzzer.

It was this unwavering support and thrilling environment, with the fans in red keeping up their chanting for the whole game, that drew Matan Adelson – youngest son of Miriam and Sheldon Adelson – to buy out the team’s previous owners a year ago and take on the unique challenge of turning Hapoel, which has all the charm of a community team, into the face of Israeli basketball and, he hopes, an international brand.

Adelson, who moved to Israel three years ago, is no stranger to the world of professional basketball. As he tells it, he’s been in love with the game since he was a child and his lifelong dream, he explained to Jewish Insider in a rare interview, has been to own his own basketball team.

As well as Hapoel, the Adelson family, now headed by Miriam, acquired the majority stake in the NBA’s Dallas Mavericks last November, in an agreement worth some $3.5 billion.

“My goal from when I was a very little kid was to buy an NBA team one day, specifically the Lakers,” Adelson, 25, told JL. “But when I turned 18, my dad sat me down and said, ‘If you ever have the chance to buy the Lakers, don’t do it.”

When the younger Adelson asked why, his father replied: “Because the Lakers will always be the Lakers, they’re always going to be in the biggest market with the most championships and the sexiest brand, and you’ll have very little room to create value with the Lakers.”

“He told me to ‘buy a team that’s down here and build it up to here,’” Adelson continued, lowering his hand and then raising it up. “By creating value, you’re going to learn a lot and you’re going to be very personally fulfilled.”

Fast-forward a few years, when the opportunity to buy Hapoel Jerusalem came
across his desk. Adelson, who also invests in startups, said he realized the purchase could be the "opportunity to create the value that my dad was ultimately referring to."

“That, coupled with my strong sense of Zionism and the fact that I live here, and I love this country and I'm a very proud Jew, everything kind of came together in one,” Adelson added.

When Adelson announced his takeover of the iconic Jerusalem team in a press conference last June, he laid out his vision for Hapoel, saying that “Jerusalem deserves a basketball team that reflects just how magnificent it is.”

Among the goals outlined, Adelson said he hoped to boost the team's brand internationally, including entering it into the Euroleague alongside Maccabi Tel Aviv, bringing the Basketball Champions League's finals to Israel, as well as setting up exhibition games with international teams, including those in the NBA.

Additionally, he said he wanted to recruit new talent to the team from both Israel and abroad, as well as bolster its management and training infrastructure, and streamline the fan experience in and outside of its home arena.

“My aim is to bring talent with professional sports management experience from the United States, individuals who can cultivate a best practice and Western mindset for Hapoel,” Adelson, who studied sports management as part of his economics degree at Stanford University, said at the press conference.

Adelson’s dreams for Hapoel Jerusalem did not seem outlandish for a team that last month won the Israeli State Cup and finished the season in fourth place, but he could not have foreseen the broader events that would soon turn the country upside down when Hamas terrorists attacked southern Israel on Oct. 7, sparking a full-blown war in Gaza and intense fighting in the north.

“I wouldn’t say my vision has changed [since last year], but I would say my way has changed and my process has changed,” he said, referring to the impact the war has had on his plans and on Israeli sports in general.

“My goal [for Hapoel] is still for it to become the face of Israeli basketball and the team of the Jewish people,” Adelson stated.

On an international level, however, fulfilling his vision has been tricky.

Plans to bring the Basketball Champions League's final tournament to Israel did not happen, despite advanced negotiations, he said, and bringing star players from abroad has been challenging because of fears over the war.

However, Adelson remains hopeful. He told JI that there are talks with a number of NBA teams about playing Hapoel in preseason games in the future, although that is not likely to happen until the 2025-26 season.

With international plans on hold for now, Adelson said the war has forced him to turn his attention inward and allowed him to really get to know Hapoel and its unique fan base.

“I thought, when I bought the team, that I understood it but very quickly I realized that I didn’t understand how important this team is for this community,” he said. “I'm learning more and more every day, especially because so many of our fans have been personally affected by the war.”

Adelson counted at least 20 diehard Hapoel fans who were killed on or since Oct. 7 and two who were taken hostage. Ofir Engel, who was released during the cease-fire last November, and Hersh Goldberg-Polin, have been consistently highlighted by the team and the fans.

Last month, Engel, 18, joined the players in lifting the trophy after their win in the Israeli State Cup, while Goldberg-Polin's image now adorns some of the team's merchandise and a full-size banner calling for him to be brought home hangs in the stands.

“At the beginning of the war, I attended a few funerals and shivas; it has been a powerful experience,” recounted Adelson, who also spent time with Goldberg-Polin's parents, Rachel and Jonathan.

“I asked all those I met what Hapoel means to you, and they all responded that it was like family,” he said. “While it’s very cliche to say, ‘my sports team is my family,’ it is very apparent that this is actually what Hapoel is – it means so much for so many people.”

“I know that sports, in the grand scheme of things right now, doesn't mean much, we still have hostages in Gaza and we're still fighting a war on several fronts, but when you see how impactful the game is for those people who are really grieving and really suffering, you realize that this is their only route to happiness right now, they are escaping from reality,” he said.

Even as Adelson deals with the challenges brought on by the war, he said that he is preparing to spend the off-season working on plans to strengthen the club, building up its fan base by reaching out to the local community and moving forward with the search for a location to build a state-of-the-art training facility for the team in Jerusalem.

Only with these improvements at home, he said, will he be able to turn Hapoel into an international brand, playing against foreign teams. And, Adelson told JI, he is not deterred by the rise in antisemitism and anti-Israel activity in the U.S. or too worried that global politics might seep into the game.

“I believe that the NBA was the first professional sports league to put out a statement in support of Israel right after Oct. 7,” Adelson said, pointing out that the NBA's commissioner, Adam Silver, is Jewish as well as many of the team's owners, and that the league has made several trips to Israel.

In a general sense, he said that organized sports had done a “good job of keeping politics outside of the arena or outside the stadium.”

“If you ask me, I think the beauty of sports is the ability for me as a fan to be sitting in an arena next to hundreds of people that I don't know and no matter what happens, we cheer together or we’re sad together because our team wins or loses,” Adelson said. “It is that connection, that we're all rooting for the same cause, that is the beauty of sports.”

Asked about recent anti-Israel actions by one of his Dallas Mavericks players, Kyrie Irving, Adelson said that while “players can say whatever they want or believe, just like the average citizen … I personally think there should be no place in sports for politics.”

“That doesn’t mean that athletes can’t have their own opinions, or can’t share their own opinions,” he emphasized. “But I do think leagues and teams should do everything they can to stay as quiet as they can on political issues.”
The Orthodox shul that’s attracting a young crowd, especially post-Oct. 7 — along with major investors

Upper East Side shul sees surge in under-36 members, which its founders credit to efforts to make the community welcoming, post-Oct. 7 search for engagement

By Haley Cohen

The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.

David, a 31-year-old bachelor in New York City, is not within the traditional demographic group that joins a synagogue. But at the Altneu, David — who requested not to be identified by his last name or profession — is among the largest and fastest-growing demographic.

Polls from recent years show that synagogue attendance is dwindling for the majority of American Jewish young adults — especially those unmarried and without children — who either don’t attend regularly, or hop around between different synagogues without joining and paying dues. Yet people under 36 are increasingly flocking to the Upper East Side Orthodox synagogue Altneu — and committing to the $1,200 per person, per year price tag. (Dues increase to $1,800 per person, per year for those over 36.)

The synagogue’s leaders attribute this both to their own efforts to develop a welcoming, attractive community and to the broader rise in engagement that is being seen throughout the Jewish world after the Oct. 7 terror attacks and accompanying rise in global antisemitism, what the Jewish Federations of North America have referred to as “The Surge.”

According to the synagogue’s data from May, nearly 40% of the 430 paying member units are under 36 (this does not include children). Members between 36-55 and members older than 55 make up the remaining 30.42% and 30.76%, respectively. Congregants under 36 who spoke to eJewishPhilanthropy, several of whom did not come from a traditional Orthodox background, attributed Altneu’s allure to the newness and innovation of the synagogue that still hews to tradition. Additionally, they pointed favorably to the congregation’s lack of marketing specifically to young professionals as well as the similarly young ages of its leadership.

“In my years after college, I flirted with shuls downtown that felt ‘sceney.’ This was the first community that felt right to me in a shul,” David said. “I think it’s important to pay dues at a shul, and I had no hesitation in doing so once I found a community that I did want to plant roots in... this is a well-curated, intellectual community with high-caliber people that feels different than whatever else is available,” he continued, noting that among single peers his age, paying synagogue dues and attending frequently are rare. “They’re not doing it, especially not the secular ones,” he said.

“I wasn’t willing to compromise on a place that is Orthodox by the books,” David said of his yearslong synagogue search. “Altneu checks that box, but at the same time, Altneu is not all-encompassing in that sense. People there understand that.”

Altneu was founded in 2022 by Rabbi Benjamin Goldschmidt, 36, and his wife, journalist Avital Chizhik-Goldschmidt, 32, after the couple abruptly split from the 130-year-old Park East Synagogue, one of the city’s most established and moneymaking Modern Orthodox congregations, also located on the Upper East Side. Until this spring, Altneu had no permanent location. Each Shabbat, congregants flutered between various neighborhood venues, which included private homes, the Asia Society, the Pierre Hotel and the Explorers Club. In March, after extensive fundraising from a board that includes bankers, CEOs and a Blackstone executive, Altneu purchased a Tudor Revival townhouse on East 70th Street for $34.5 million. (The donors have declined to be identified.)

In an interview with eJP, Chizhik-Goldschmidt noted the significance of the new location’s timing — which she said will allow for more extensive classes and programming. “Post-Oct 7,” she said, “there are those who are giving towards fighting antisemitism and looking outward. Now is also a time to focus inward, not just on strengthening Diaspora Jewry, but building sustainable, creative, innovative, forward-thinking communities that are not shells of themselves but real and vibrant.”

“The space is so tight now, which is a good problem to have but it’s gotten so crowded that it’s almost uncomfortable,” David said of the six-story, 55-foot-wide townhouse, where he attends daily minyan. “It’s hard for me to differentiate if that’s because of [people wanting community after] Oct. 7, if it’s a momentum that was already there or if it’s the new building. It all kind of happened at once, but it’s probably all of the above.”

Among the initial young members of Altneu — the ones who would eagerly wait for an email from Goldschmidt each week to learn which new spot they’d be praying at — were Amanda Daman, 32, and her husband, who are now the parents of a 7-month-old. “We started going right as they started services,” Daman, an Altneu lay leader who requested not to be identified by her last name or profession, recalled. “We had just gotten married and didn’t know where to go and tried out this new thing.
We tried out other congregations and loved that there were people of all ages, not just a young crowd or old crowd; it’s the mix that makes the shul so attractive.”

David and Chizhik-Goldschmidt echoed that the blend of ages makes Altneu unique. “There are so many young people but I think I would be turned off by a synagogue that’s specifically marketed to young professionals,” David said.

Chizhik-Goldschmidt, who is a news editor at the real estate outlet The Real Deal in addition to her role as rebbetzin, added, “We have a very high number for the young generation, but at the same time it is very proportionate of age spread across the congregation.”

The mix of old and young is befitting to Altneu’s name — which is a portmanteau of the Yiddish words for “old” and “new” and a tribute to The Old New Synagogue, also called the Altneuschul, a historic Orthodox Jewish congregation in Prague. Goldschmidt, whose father is the former chief rabbi of Moscow, Pinchas Goldschmidt, said in a 2022 Shabbat sermon: “The Altneu name always struck me, since the first time I stepped foot inside the Prague synagogue when I was 15 years old, as it also has a personal significance to me. My father is Chief Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, and his father is Sol Goldschmidt, the son of Fransicka Goldschmidt who was instrumental in arranging the Kindertransport from Frankfurt saving orphaned Jewish children, who was the daughter of Rabbi Dr. Tobias Lewenstein (rabbi of Zurich and before that Copenhagen) and Flora Lewenstein, who was the daughter of Theresa Meller of Altona near Hamburg, who was a direct descendant of the Maharal of Prague — making me the 17th generation to the Maharal. It is incumbent on every Neu to know that he or she is standing on the giant shoulders of the Alt.”

Members and synagogue leadership said that several factors make Altneu appealing to young millennials and Generation Z.

Judith Frishman, 31, joined Altneu with her husband, Shlomo, 30, in 2022. “I would hop between a few Upper East synagogues every week, usually Shlomo didn’t want to come,” Judith, who works at JP Morgan, recalled. “I tried out Altneu and since that time we basically stopped going anywhere else.”

“I really would not go anywhere else. I would stay at home and once I started going to Altneu, I became the guy pushing my wife out the door to go to shul. Never in my life did I think I’d want to go to shul as much as I do now, so much so that I don’t like leaving the city,” added Shlomo, who is a native of Minnesota and works in accounting and finance for a health-care staffing company. “I make it a point to welcome new people at shul, and I’ve heard people say that they haven’t felt welcomed in a shul like they do in Altneu throughout their time in New York.”

Judith said that she liked that “the rabbi and Avital are very young and connected with modern Judaism. We are all working through the same things together because they are around our age.”

According to Chizhik-Goldschmidt, “the shul is not a classic Modern Orthodox synagogue.”

“We have a broad spectrum,” she said. “Everyone from people who were unaffiliated before to those who grew up quite Orthodox. Everyone is looking for a spiritual experience. It’s a place where they matter and are seen. The beauty of a new synagogue — which I never thought about until this was my life — is that in a new synagogue, everyone is new. So there’s no dodgy, stuffy snobbery. The culture isn’t ‘who are you, what’s your name, where are you from’ like in a lot of New York City.”

Despite the under 36 bracket being Altneu’s fastest-growing demographic, Chizhik-Goldschmidt said she still finds herself pleasantly surprised each time the congregation receives a membership application with a birthdate in the late 1990’s. “I’m like ‘wow, that’s real commitment,’” she said with a laugh.

“Part of the problem with congregations is that they have really lowered the bar for young people to be involved in community life,” Chizhik-Goldschmidt said. “They just throw a young professionals party every year and show that they have a party with enough photos from the event. We see that all the time — of nonprofits and synagogues. The difference here is we actually have a high bar for you. We believe young people should be involved. This shouldn’t be a community led by a certain generation. It has to be led by everyone.”

“I don’t know if I really believed in the power of community until this whole story happened,” she said.

The sentiment is certainly felt by Daman, who was in the process of planning the Altneu young couples summer soirée, held on Tuesday, when she spoke with eJP.

“At Altneu,” Daman said, “you find that your presence means something.”
By Matthew Kassel

In late spring of 2022, Rep. Jamaal Bowman (D-NY) reached out to a local Jewish leader in Westchester County to ask for an unusual favor as he prepared to defend his seat in an August primary against two Democratic challengers who were each gaining support from the district’s sizable Jewish community.

“Do you have pics of us?” Bowman texted the Jewish leader, with whom he had previously maintained a cordial if uneasy relationship, according to a screenshot of the message shared with Jewish Insider. “So I can show the world I’m friends with Jewish People.”

The Jewish leader, who described the exchange on the condition of anonymity to protect his privacy, did have at least one photo on hand from a Jewish community gathering in Bowman’s district months earlier at which the then-freshman Democrat had vowed to sign on to a House bill aimed at strengthening the Abraham Accords — a promise he fulfilled just a few days later.

But by the time Bowman sent his request to the Jewish leader in an apparent effort to counter mounting dissatisfaction with his record on Israel amid the campaign, the New York legislator had since reversed course and pulled his support for the bill aimed at further normalizing relations between Israel and its Arab neighbors — angering Jewish activists in the district who said they felt blindsided by his abrupt decision.

“I was uncomfortable,” the Jewish leader said of Bowman’s awkwardly worded text message two years ago. “I kind of joked around with him about it. I said, ‘Oh, I’m sure you guys have it. Don’t worry about it.’”

He didn’t share a photo — and Bowman, who defeated his challengers later that summer, never asked for one again, the Jewish leader told JI in a recent interview. “I was like, ‘I don’t want to be his court Jew,’” he explained of his thinking at the time of the exchange. “That wasn’t what I signed up for.”

Now that he is seeking a third term in a bitterly contested primary next Tuesday, Bowman has found himself in an increasingly uncomfortable position with Jewish voters as he has embraced a growing number of hostile positions toward Israel in the wake of Hamas’ Oct. 7 attacks — one of the top issues in his imperiled race for reelection.

More broadly across the Democratic primary electorate, polling has shown that Bowman’s extreme views on the Israel-Hamas war are not shared by a plurality of voters in his district, where he is facing a career-threatening challenge from Westchester County Executive George Latimer, a popular pro-Israel Democrat who is leading by double digits.

Bowman, who in January lost a key endorsement from the progressive advocacy group J Street over his approach to Israel, insists that he continues to draw significant backing from Jewish constituents, even as he has recently pledged to oppose funding for Israel’s Iron Dome missile-defense system and endorsed the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement targeting the Jewish state, which he had long claimed to reject.

“Thank God I still have a lot of support within the Jewish community,” the progressive lawmaker, who is endorsed by such far-left Jewish groups as Jewish Voice for Peace, which supports BDS, said in an interview on Monday with the WNYC radio host Brian Lehrer.

But his text to the Jewish leader, just a couple of months before his first campaign for reelection last cycle, suggests that Bowman, 48, has long been at least privately aware that his relationship with a key constituency over his record on Israel has been on shaky ground — and could be a political liability.

Bowman’s campaign did not respond to a request for comment from JI on Monday.

Bowman and his allies have sought to cast his primary as a battle against right-wing interests funding attacks from the pro- Israel lobbying group AIPAC, whose super PAC has invested more than $11 million in the race.

Some progressive Jews who back Bowman say they appreciate the congressman’s outspoken criticism of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his support for a cease-fire, while arguing that AIPAC’s involvement in the race does not serve the interests of voters.

But the congressman’s focus on outside spending has obscured an on-the-ground reality reflected in what Jewish voters describe as their widespread disenchantment with his lack of meaningful outreach both before and after Hamas’ attacks.

Notwithstanding his hard-line positions on Israel, Jewish leaders contend that Bowman’s tenure has also been defined by a lack of interest in engaging with the organized Jewish community on a personal level — by ignoring invitations to join Shabbat meals, for instance, or skipping events sponsored by the Westchester Jewish Council, among other things, according to multiple people who spoke with JI.

Bowman “was always invited to events sponsored by the council,” said William Schrag, who recently
stepped down from his position as the longtime president of the Westchester Jewish Council. “He chose not to attend and frankly, by that point, I didn’t care whether he attended or not because it was obvious he was on a path antithetical to the mission statement of the Westchester Jewish Council.”

William Schrag, who recently stepped down from his position as the longtime president of the Westchester Jewish Council, said that the last event Bowman attended was the group’s annual gala in February 2023. The congressman “arrived two hours late — in the middle of our program,” Schrag noted.

When Bowman was first elected to the House, defeating a pro-Israel incumbent, Schrag said that he and the Westchester Jewish Council’s CEO “reached out to him and his staffers immediately” and “had several conversations via Zoom” that each ended with the congressman “or one of his staffers saying we needed to consult with one another, particularly on areas where we might disagree.”

“However, we weren’t consulted before Congressman Bowman flipped on the Abraham Accords and I don’t recall having been consulted since that time,” Schrag told JI last week. “That said,” Bowman “was always invited to events sponsored by the council,” Schrag added. “He chose not to attend and frankly, by that point, I didn’t care whether he attended or not because it was obvious he was on a path antithetical to the mission statement of the Westchester Jewish Council.”

Many Jewish leaders share a similar feeling.

Early in his incumbency, Bowman, who drew backlash from the left for visiting Israel and voting in favor of Iron Dome funding during his first term, had also briefly maintained an ongoing dialogue with a group of local rabbis with whom he discussed Middle East policy and other issues of concern to the Jewish community.

Those conversations have all ended as his stances on Israel have shifted to the far left over the last couple of years. The rabbis “have since stopped responding to him,” according to a Jewish activist familiar with the matter.

“He’s completely embraced the anti-Israel movement. He’s not interested at all in the Jewish community.”

Justin Brasch, a White Plains councilman and a Jewish Democrat, said of Bowman in an interview with JI. “He doesn’t reach out. He doesn’t reach back. He’s not interested at all in the Jewish community.”

To some Jewish leaders in the district, Bowman’s long-deteriorating relationship with Jewish voters has now reached its nadir thanks to his decision to support BDS, which is widely viewed as antisemitic within the Jewish and pro-Israel communities.

His about-face on the movement, in a private endorsement interview with the Democratic Socialists of America last month, has convinced some Jewish leaders that Bowman simply cannot be trusted to represent a district that is home to one of the largest Jewish constituencies in the country.

“He doesn’t tell the truth,” Amy Paulin, a Democratic state assemblywoman in Westchester who is among several local elected officials backing Latimer’s campaign, said in a recent interview with JI.

Paulin, who called the congressman’s endorsement of BDS “clearly antisemitic,” recalled that the first time she met Bowman in person, during a meeting with the Scarsdale Democratic Town Committee in late 2019, “we specifically asked him if he supported the BDS movement — and he said ‘absolutely not.’”

Now, she said, “it’s clear that he does — and that he’s lied to us the entire time.”

“I don’t believe anything he says anymore,” Paulin said of Bowman. “That goes beyond the Jewish community, but certainly we in the Jewish community have no confidence in his support or empathy or camaraderie. You just can’t trust him.”

For his part, the Jewish leader whom Bowman asked for a photo last election cycle told JI he no longer speaks with the congressman — and hasn’t for some time — because of disagreements over Israel that he described as ultimately irreconcilable.

“He’s completely embraced the other side,” the Jewish leader said of his representative. ♦
A new exhibition showcasing more than 90 Israeli artists who incorporated tattered and torn Israeli flags into their works opened last week

By Ruth Marks Eglash

Its design is simple: two blue stripes on a crisp, white background, with a Star of David sitting proudly in the center. Yet for many Israelis and others around the world, especially during this time of crisis and war, Israel’s national flag evokes powerful emotions ranging from fierce love and patriotism to extreme antisemitism and hatred.

Now, some 90 Israeli artists have taken the highly recognizable and emotive symbol of the Jewish state and reimagined it using worn-out and weather-beaten flags that once lined a road in the Arava Desert. While the works offer a new dimension to the flag’s design, all express the heartbeat, fear and hope the nation of Israel is experiencing after more than eight months of war.

A week ago, the exhibition titled “From Erosion to Hope,” which opened last month in Tel Aviv ahead of Israel’s Memorial Day, arrived in Mevasseret Zion, a town just outside of Jerusalem where Arnon Zamora, the hero of the daring Gaza operation that saved the rescue of four hostages earlier this month, grew up.

The 36-year-old chief inspector of the Israel police’s Yamam special forces, who was killed in the high-stakes mission, was the son of a longtime elementary school teacher in Mevasseret.

Hours before the exhibit officially opened its doors in the town, hundreds of tearful residents lined the main boulevard waving a new set of Israeli flags as Zamora’s wife, Michal, and other family members made their way towards Jerusalem’s military cemetery on Mount Herzl.

The juxtaposition of the new flags waved ahead of Zamora’s funeral, set against the repurposing and reimagining of worn-out and battered flags in the exhibition was not lost on Yoram Shimon, Mevasseret Zion’s mayor.

“The flag is a symbol that connects the individual to his or her country,” Shimon said as he opened the display, which is being managed by the Association of Artists and Art lovers in Mevasseret Zion in a repurposed store in one of the town’s shopping malls.

The day of Zamora’s funeral “was a day when Mevasseret Zion was the focus of the whole country, so [it] is even more meaningful that this exhibition is opening here today,” Hannah Rothschild, the curator and brainchild of the exhibition, told Jewish Insider at the opening event.

Rothschild, an artist who is also a trained clinical social worker specializing in the field of trauma, has been working with survivors of the Oct. 7 massacre. It was during a trip south to counsel evacuated residents of the devastated kibbutzim that she came up with the idea to turn Israel’s national symbol into art as a way to identify with the country’s pain and the hostages still being held in Gaza.

“I was on the bus, and I saw this row of flags that were really worn out and waving in the wind.” Rothschild recounted of a recent journey to the Arava Desert, where one of the evacuated communities is now being housed. “What fascinated me most was that the erosion of the flags was happening all around the edges, just like erosion happening now in Israel because of the hostage situation, because so many soldiers are being killed and because of Oct. 7.”

On another of her visits to the evacuated community, Rothschild noticed the eroded flags had been replaced with new ones. She wondered what had happened to the old flags and was soon connected with Yonatan Rotem, the man responsible for the flags decorating the area’s main highway.

“He was really happy to give them to me because he himself did not know what to do with so many eroded flags,” Rothschild said, adding, “When I told him my idea to use them for art, he was very happy that we would be giving them new life.”

“When you get something that is worn out, everything you do to it makes it feel new, so by working with these specific flags, adding, mending and fixing them you build something new,” she explained.

Armed with a pile of tattered and torn-up flags, Rothschild described to JI how she reached out to more than 100 artists across the country, asking if they would like to be part of this project. More than 90 of them responded positively, she recalled.

Many of the artists, Rothschild said, felt like being part of the show was their form of milutin, or military reserve duty.

Distributing the flags two months ago, the curator said she made only one request to the artists: to be respectful with the nation’s symbol, which became a controversial flashpoint during last year’s clashes over the government’s controversial plans to reform the judiciary.

The works produced by the artists range in type and form, with all expressing their reaction as Israelis to the events on Oct. 7 and beyond. There are fragments of flags sewn together with other national symbols, such as parts of IDF uniforms or religious garments. There are flags that are screwed up and stuffed into pickling jars – for preservation – and another where the artist placed the flag inside a Palestinian Coca-Cola bottle mimicking a Molotov cocktail.

Some of the works offer hope, with a
golden Star of David replacing the faded blue one, or another that appears to be the belly of a pregnant woman bringing new life. Others are less positive, with some emphasizing the scorch marks caused by the sun or adding drops of red blood.

In one work, artist Daniella Meller sewed up her flag with surgical stitches and connected it to a blood transfusion. In the notes, she explains that Haim Perry, a hostage from Kibbutz Nir Oz who was recently pronounced dead, was a close friend.

Each piece includes a treatise explaining the meaning of the work and a short bio of the artist; the details are written in Hebrew, English and Arabic, which Rothschild hopes will allow Israelis from all sectors to connect to the exhibit. She also has plans to display the exhibition in other places in the country and, at some point, is hoping to take it to the U.S.

Rothschild said that most of the proceeds from the show, including sales of the artworks, will go to the Hostages and Missing Families Forum.

There are reminders of the hostages in multiple other works.

In “Through what has been unraveled,” Tel Aviv artist Dana Cohen pieced together two different flags and overlaid the new flag with tiny swaths of yellow felt, the color that has come to represent the plight of 240 people who were kidnapped to Gaza Oct. 7.

“What I received was a used flag that was torn into two pieces and immediately those torn pieces gave me the feeling that this country is torn too,” Cohen told JI. “I felt that I needed to respond to that national breakdown in both a general way and a personal way.”

In a general way, Cohen said she chose to focus on the hostages because it “is the reality of life” in Israel since that fateful day and because those being held have become “part of our own identities.”

“I worked with the yellow ribbons that are now identified with the fight for the release of the hostages because I felt this material could represent the collective worry for their safety and their return, which has now become part of our nation’s history,” she said, adding that it was really important to her that the yellow be fused into the fiber of the existing flag using a technique called “needle felting.”

“I wanted to put that material inside the flag and see the flag go through a change that would give our new history a visual element,” Cohen explained.

On a personal level, the artist said that through her work she always tries to find hope for the future or new life in something from the past.

“I try to give my audience a chance to find beauty and life in something they thought was already dead,” she said. “As individuals and as a collective, this creates a positive and hopeful outlook.”

Tali Navon, who titled her work “We are 2024,” also offers a ray of hope. Her tattered flag is set in a plexiglass frame imprinted with a line of oil painted figures holding hands.

“The minute I received that torn flag, I felt that it was in the same state as our nation,” she told JI. “It’s not that someone came and cut it with scissors, we are really worn and torn.”

But, the Givatyim artist said she noticed something else happening in Israel on Oct. 7 – “the people had a desire to connect.”

“We are a nation that is smart, sensitive and humanitarian and even those communities that were attacked on Oct. 7 wanted to connect to the people on the other side [in Gaza],” Navon said, explaining the idea for the row of human figures facing the torn flag.

“I want us all to be together living in peace,” she added. “I don’t know how we get there but that is my desire and so I tried to piece it all back together, connecting the torn flag with pins, which are something that hurt people and added the people in front of the flag.”

“I do believe it might be possible for us to connect if the desire comes from the people, not from our leaders, but even if we do get back together those rips in our fabric will never disappear,” Navon said. “It is a type of hope, even though it is very difficult.”